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Designing Web-Based Intercultural Training Customised for Enterprises Hosting International Placements

- the Skill2E model -

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Abstract

Harnessing the outcomes of SKILL2E Project (<http://skill2e.fh-salzburg.ac.at/>), a EU-funded university-enterprise cooperation project focused on students' sustainable intercultural competence acquisition enabling effective integration in transnational placements, the paper suggests a model of web-based intercultural training tool envisaged as a simultaneously-shared company-university and inter-university instructional tool providing hands-on guidelines, best practices and training related to the management of international placements and intercultural interactions in multicultural working environments.

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1. Introduction

Although intuitively perceived by engineering professionals ‘as peripheral to their work’ (Bennett, 2009:95), intercultural competence is nowadays ‘equally vital domestically and internationally’ (Bennett, 2009:95) and forces universities to design and implement intercultural training modules customised both for students going abroad on international placements as well as for companies hosting such transnational internships. Approaching intercultural competence as an effective enabler of students' increased employability in the current context of culturally diverse working environments and internationalised recruitment and capitalizing on the valuable expertise and insights into today's cultural mentoring practices of European companies as provided by project partners (6 universities and 4 enterprises across Europe (Austria, Finland, Great Britain, Romania, Spain, Turkey), 2 US-based institutions) within SKILL2E Project (<http://skill2e.fh-salzburg.ac.at/>), the present article advances a model of enterprise-dedicated intercultural training tool shaped as a facile web-based handbook that provides a three-layered resourceful environment addressing the most diverse needs of enterprises in terms of international placement management.

While the first sections outline current cultural mentoring practices characteristic of European companies, internationally-validated theories and survey findings accountable for the conceptual framework underlying this

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tool, the core section of the article is dedicated to the web-based content structuring and design of this tool envisaged as a simultaneously-shared company-university and inter-university instructional instrument.

2. Current Cultural Mentoring Practices

Within the project activities, open-ended question-based interviews were conducted among 10-15 companies per country providing interesting insights into cultural mentoring practices, related (mis)perceptions, goals and challenges.

None of the surveyed companies has a cultural mentoring program and, most typically, no clear distinction is made by companies between an induction program and cultural mentoring.

All surveyed companies display a coherently-organized integration of newly-employed staff or placement students that involves the joint work of the HR staff members and managers (be they business unit managers, project leaders, team leaders, technical experts). Human resources provide new employees/ placement students with administrative, organizational and work-security training, whereas technical training and coaching, customized for the needs of the recently-joined team, are ensured by the management staff (business unit managers, project leaders, team leaders, technical experts).

For most employers, the terms ‘business culture’ and ‘organizational culture’ are overlapping and resonate company values and policies; one interesting answer came from a joint-venture that distinguishes between the mentoring culture assumed by the company (“we continuously encourage the practice of mentoring to build and to strengthen each other, offering permanent support, creating opportunities”) and the cultural mentoring encouraged (“we continuously encourage team work on a diversity of multicultural influences in order to develop ourselves and be the best prepared for global economic context”).

All respondents distinguish clearly between ‘national culture’ and ‘business culture’/‘organizational culture’ and describe the national culture in terms of country-specific practices merging with American/globalized practices.

Equally important, all surveyed companies identify goals and challenges as advantages of cultural mentoring. The most important goals include: harmonization of communication styles and working practices in virtual teams whose team members come from various geographical areas, enhancing employer branding, increased work productivity/efficiency, ensuring the right fit of placement student and company objectives, addressing issues of demographic change and necessity for workforce diversity in the near future, improving internal and external communication (especially with foreign clients), business expansion across Europe/worldwide, wider recruiting pool for attracting international talent, employees’ long term professional and personal development. The challenges in reaching these goals include: dealing with different communication styles, dealing with conflict and lack of trust, raising awareness of diversity, dealing with clash of expectations, addressing skill development, integrating trainees /interns/employees with migratory backgrounds, identifying and separating personality aspects from cultural influence, assessing development with reference to dealing with different cultural backgrounds, enabling and delivering mentor training.

3. Conceptual Framework

The underlying conceptual framework capitalizes on three key factors that include:

- a well-conceived selection of partner universities and enterprises reflecting a wide cross-section of the European culture manifested in the most diverse forms, be they national, academic, student, company cultures, to ensure a multi-perspective approach adequate for generating sustainable results;
- provision of a three-perspective insight (university-company-international interns) able to address the most diverse needs of students sent on international placements and employers hosting international placements;
- internationally-validated theories and studies as follows:
 - Hammer’s developmental intercultural model (2007) emphasizing acculturation as a process of intercultural sensitivity awareness and assimilation with clear descriptions of each stage (denial, polarization, minimization, acceptance, adaptation) in the developmental continuum and guidance related to progression from monocultural

orientation to multicultural orientation. A helpful tool in this respect is the IDI test (Intercultural Development Inventory test), developed by Hammer as a 50-item questionnaire whose completion generates the respondent's cultural profile and the corresponding positioning along the developmental continuum with a very practical Perceived Orientation score that indicates how the respondent sees himself/herself along the developmental continuum which is indicative of his/her most likely cultural (non)openness in intercultural interactions. This tool is highly effective in assessing interns' initial cultural status, in monitoring and assessing their evolution and post-placement progress in terms of intercultural competence development and, conversely, in assessing employers' cultural awareness and sensitivity;

- Hofstede's studies (2001, 1991) have been chosen to give both employers and interns the basics needed to approach organizational cultures and related communication styles against universally-shared cultural values such as the degree of inequality that exists/is accepted among people with and without power, the degree of individualism characteristic of a certain culture, the prevalence of (fe)male values in certain cultures, etc., which contribute a lot to the students' smooth integration in the hosting enterprise;

- The Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness research program, also known as the GLOBE Study of 62 Societies (House et al., 2004) investigates the relation between leadership and intercultural competence and identifies key leadership behaviours (charismatic/value based, team oriented, participative, humane oriented, autonomous and self-protective) and attributes (trustworthy, intelligent, just, decisive, etc.) (House et al. 2004) and provides a good resource to transform today's students into tomorrow's successful leaders;

- McKinsey & Company's study (2011, Barta, T. et al.) conducted in Germany, France, Great Britain and the USA provides clear evidence of the intrinsic link between cultural diversity and economic success. Its results showed that throughout the 2008-2012 financial crisis companies whose executive boards were more culturally and gender diverse achieved on average 53% more returns on equity (ROE) than least diverse companies in all surveyed countries. This study is indicative of an organisation's ability to recognize intercultural synergy as a pool of resources that can lead to enhanced productivity, capacity for innovation and competitive advantages.

4. Enterprise Handbook

Conceived to be harnessed as an instructional tool providing procedural orientations and practical guidelines for employers offering international student placements, the Enterprise Handbook is structured around three interconnected layers:

- **Level 1** (primary layer) outlines a step-by-step procedure for managing international placements describing action points to follow from the initial contact and selection of an international placement (culture-bound welcoming and introductions, company presentation, newly-joined team presentation, etc.) to ensuring accommodation, continuous support, post-placement follow up activities, etc.;

- **Level 2** (intermediate layer) sets out drafting standards and principles for well-written, practical forms such as Placement Offers, International Job Offers, Internship Topic Descriptions, Monitoring Sheets, Post-Placement Reporting Sheets that companies need to be able produce in order to attract the best international students, supervise their performance or recruit employees from overseas; Furthermore, it devices a step-by-step procedure on how to implement the concept of cultural mentoring in an organization, it describes relevant aspects of cultural mentoring and provides a set of best practice cases of transnational placements retrieved from each culture.

- **Level 3** (resource layer) provides examples of online forms and methodologies, clarifications and recommendations for all aspects related to international placements and links to other project deliverables (Intercultural assessment tool, Cultural mentoring concept); it also displays interactive resources for maintaining post-placement contact with foreign interns; last but not least, it describes further applications of the handbook such as managing expatriates and staff interacting with international customers or peers.

The table below outlines visually the structure of this instructional tool:

Structure	Level 1 (primary level)	Level 2 (intermediate level)	Level 3 (resource level)
	Stakeholder involvement plan students/interns universities enterprises/employers	Cultural mentoring description cultural mentor concept instruments country-bound context assessment	Links to project deliverables Online forms/methodologies International work area Communication tools Testimonials (videos, blogs, photos)
	Step-by-step procedure for placement offer student selection pre-placement in-placement post -placement	Practical tools intercultural assessment tool intercultural reflection best practices of transnational placements retrieved from each culture	Weblinks
	Continuous support Follow-up activities		

Table 1. The visual representation of the training tool structure

5. Conclusions

Whereas only the set of best practice cases of transnational placements is intended to be made available both online and in printed form distributed in the shape of brochure, the entire Enterprise handbook is conceived as an interactive training tool whose major strength is the stakeholder involvement plan (student, university, enterprise) bringing together in the same interactive environment views, insights, interventions from all parties involved. Simultaneously shared by students, enterprises and universities, it features helpful sharable, upgradeable information and interactive tools allowing immediate and easy exchange of expertise and information (blogs, videoblogs, testimonials) documenting best practices and models for highly effective international placements.

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